
A Weak Argument: The Errors of Victor Berger

by Laurence Gronlund

June 23, 1898

The reason why I condemn Comrade [Victor L.] Berger, of Milwaukee, and his followers for seceding from the Social Democracy is because they thereby intended to break up and destroy a new and splendid instrument for the emancipation of the masses. It is a childish procedure. It is just like a child who refuses to play any more with its playfellows because it cannot have its will in a particular point. No matter how right they have been on the question of political action vs. colonization, they should for the time being have bowed to the will of the majority and afterwards tried to persuade and convince their comrades. That would have been the proper procedure, simply because the Social Democracy is the only American socialist movement there is.

The Socialist Labor Party is, in spite of its pretensions, a German movement; it is now more than 25 years old and has just as little chance of winning an American majority as a 50-year old maiden has of being married. But it is not the way of persuading and winning Americans to kick them.

There are, however, other criticisms I have to make on the platform which Berger presented to the convention. It is in the first place altogether too long and too wordy for a political document; but besides this it possesses certain weaknesses, peculiarly German, and which surely ought in the future to be avoided and eliminated.

First, it starts out with the old, threadbare truism that labor, manual and mental, is the source of all wealth, and then follows a string of propositions ending with a demand for public ownership. It is a way of reasoning that is very powerful to the German and French mind, but that has just as little effect on an America as water poured on the back of a duck. It is the old deductive way of argument that was such a favorite with the French philosophers of the last century, but which now in all branches of science is condemned as faulty and everywhere replaced by the inductive form. Instead of starting out with a general proposition, like the rights of man, or the source of all wealth, on which it is by no

means evident that all philosophical minds must agree, and then proceeding down to facts, the modern, scientific way is to begin with facts which all who can see must admit, like trusts, and from these lead up to general principles. Prove to a German or a Frenchman that the existing system is false and unjust and he is ready for socialism. Not so the American; he immediately inquires; Is socialism practicable? Prove to him that the trust must end in socialism and he is convinced.

Practical Steps.

Again, Comrade Berger's practical program begins with demanding the socialization of all large industries controlled by trusts and monopolies. That is the common fault of all German programs, that they do not connect with reality, just because the German mind is theoretical. They do not unite the system we now have with the socialist system. How are we to reach the latter regime? Are we to jump into it? Well, that is evidently what the Germans intend. But nations do not jump; nations cannot jump. Even the great French revolution was not a jump, but a gradual, though rapid, descent into the inferno.

Now that is a defect which the majority of the Social Democracy at any rate avoided. They propose a step to collectivism, to wit, the abolition of the inferior federal courts and of the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court over acts of Congress. Ah, that would be an excellent step if such abolition could be effected by an act of Congress. Unfortunately it cannot be, for what is meant by the Constitution is not alone the piece of paper on which it is written but that [particular] court. The constitution cannot be abolished except by the act of a constitutional convention or by a revolution. However, there is a more practical way of taking the necessary steps that will connect with reality, in the opinion of this writer, and hence he has produced a book *The New Economy*,¹ which will be published Sept. 1.

Class Consciousness.

Lastly, "class consciousness" is a fatal German theory, upon which our German fellow socialists on all, proper and improper, occasions insist. It is a theory entirely un-American, however, fitted to European conditions; unfortunately our brothers of German origin will never condescend to give way to American characteristics and American conditions; and therefore Comrade Berger and his followers had to insist

on the theory also on this occasion. But it is always foolish to run one's head against a brick wall. The theory of class consciousness means that society is divided by a horizontal line into two sections: the wage-earners below the line and the possessing classes above the line, and then a class war is proclaimed between the two sections. That is the theory, but the practice of the Social Democratic party, even in Germany itself, is the very opposite to it, for its leaders, like the party leaders in France and England, are taken from the very class they proscribe. Marx, Lassalle, Liebknecht, Singer,² Bebel himself, belong to the possessing classes. I call this theory and the shibboleth "class war" fatal, because they are opposed to the essential socialist doctrine of the organic unity of society. There is, to be sure, a dividing line in society, because a contention is going on, but it should be a vertical line through all classes, so that we have friends of our cause in all classes, and unfortunately there will be to the last workingmen who are our foes.

Published as "A Weak Argument" in *The Social Democrat*, vol. 5, no. 24 (June 23, 1898, pg. 1.

¹ Laurence Gronlund, *The New Economy*. Chicago: Herbert S. Stone & Co., 1898.

² Paul Singer (1844-1911), a member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany from 1878, was co-chairman of the organization with August Bebel from 1890 until the time of his death.